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ABSTRACT

This report summarizes a postconference evaluation of the "Linking Family and Community Strengths" conference, held in Louisville, Kentucky, in June 1996, and describes 12 community projects based on conference lessons. Six months after the conference, an evaluation was completed by 100 of 192 participants. The conference aimed to provide a framework for understanding ways in which family and community strengths, needs, and problems affect each other and for using these interconnections as a basis for partnerships that address family/community concerns. Two out of three respondents stated that conference topics and issues were important in their state and their work. Resource materials and knowledge obtained from the conference were applied to the work of 40-60 percent of respondents. Since the conference, 40-60 percent had begun or strengthened partnerships related to family-community interests. Twelve conference participants, Cooperative Extension Service educators, were awarded minigrants to develop partnerships that would build capacity in families and communities. The 12 projects took place primarily in rural areas and addressed poverty awareness among community service providers, community leadership training, teen perceptions of family strengths, challenges of welfare reform, strengths of Native American families and communities, poverty issues, "mind shift" from needs assessment to strengths assessment, and collaboration with early childhood networks. (SV)

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Evaluation and Impacts of Linking Family and Community Strengths Conference

by
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Evaluating the Process

Six months after the "Linking Family and Community Strengths" Conference in Louisville, Kentucky, all those attending the conference received a two-page evaluation form. The tendency has been for conferences to evaluate the substantive impact of the proceedings during the actual conference. However, this may skew results, because attendees are excited by the intellectual and interpersonal exchanges that inevitably occur when participating in a conference. More important may be the extent to which the ideas and information gathered from a conference have influenced behavior and intellectual approaches after the conference. Thus, while an at-conference evaluation was completed, the planning committee also wanted to document post-conference changes. The following summarizes the responses to this post-conference evaluation. The response rate for the post-conference was 52 percent (100 responses from 192 conference attendees).

Applying the Knowledge

One purpose of the conference was to provide evidence for the ways in which family and community interests intersect and are interdependent. Thus, efforts were made to provide a conceptual context for understanding the ways in which family and community strengths, needs and problems affect each other. More than two out of three of those responding to the post-conference evaluation state that the issues and topics addressed at the conference have become important in their state and are a focus of their own work. While four in ten indicate they have used resource materials obtained through the conference in their own work, more than six in ten report they have used knowledge gained from the conference to enhance their own work. As an example of this application of knowledge gained from the conference, one third indicate they have conducted an in-service training in their state borrowing conference materials and knowledge.

Building New or Strengthening Existing Family and Community Linkages

A second purpose of the conference was to highlight the interconnections between family and community interests as the basis for building new or strengthening existing partnerships (i.e., public and private or interagency) to address family/community concerns. Thus, sessions demonstrated potential family and community linkages that strengthened the ability of partners since the conference to respond to family and community concerns. Six of ten report they have initiated contacts with persons outside their own area of expertise or work to link family and community interests. Nearly the same proportion have worked to strengthen an existing partnership and more than four in ten have initiated a new partnership linking family and community interests. Finally, more than eight of ten indicate that attending the conference has led them to think about ways to strengthen their own work by linking family and community interests.

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Transforming Learning into Action

One thousand-dollar mini grants were awarded to 12 participants of the Linking Family & Community Strengths Conference. These "Linking" grants funded several Cooperative Extension Service educators' initial attempts to partner with colleagues in other areas of specialization, and with outside organizations and agencies. The ultimate goal was to build capacity in families and communities. The grants, funded by the W.K. Kellogg Foundation and the Farm Foundation through the Southern Rural Development Center, helped recipients transform conference lessons into action at their local level. Ideas for activities that were generated at the conference were implemented in several states. The following successful activities are a direct result of funding from Linking Family and Community Strengths grants.

Life in the State of Poverty: Perceptions and Realities, Judith Urich, Arkansas. After attending the "Linking" conference, Judith Urich kept asking herself the question, "Are we as workers, volunteers, teachers, counselors, providers, administrators, and citizens offering the right kind of help (to limited resource clients)?" In clarifying her answer, Urich thought of the welfare simulation presented at the conference. The exercise, developed by the nonprofit Reform Organization of Welfare Education Association (ROWEL), is acclaimed as a unique learning tool on issues of low income. Urich submitted a proposal for a grant from "Linking" to sponsor the simulation in Mississippi County, Arkansas. With the grant money the Arkansas Cooperative Extension Service's county staff led a local community-based interdisciplinary coalition to sponsor the "Life in the State of Poverty: Perceptions and Realities." During the simulation participants role-play as members of low income families. Volunteers staff a community where the "families" live four 15-minute weeks. Participants are assigned an identity, a role in a family or in the community, a specific income, a few transportation passes needed to leave the designated house area and a variety of bills to pay during the month. "Service providers" can be contacted for help (a transportation pass is needed), and "drug dealers" visit children left alone by parents who can't afford child care. After the one-hour simulation in Arkansas, a facilitator led a discussion based on "family" experiences during the activity. One participant summed up the group's frustration by saying, "If we become this hopeless in an hour's time, imagine living that way every day of your life." Role-playing gave service providers an idea of the very real problems faced by people in poverty and helped them understand some issues welfare clients and other limited resource families deal with daily. With awareness comes an increased understanding of the human service needs of people lacking critical resources and propels agencies and individuals toward providing the "right kind of help."

"I am more sensitive to the complexity of issues facing low-resource families."
Participant in Life in a State of Poverty

Building from Within, Cheryl Zimny and Cynthia Crawford, Missouri. The process of adopting a strengths-based paradigm of human services in Saline County, Missouri, began with a six-month pilot project that reached more than 250 community leaders, volunteers and human service providers. Participatory learning sessions were held with civic groups, councils, agencies, boards, organizations and private businesses. Presentations introduced the idea of "building from within" as outlined in *Building Communities from the Inside Out--A Path Toward Finding and Mobilizing a Community's Assets* by John P. Kretzmann and John L. McKnight. Kretzmann outlined the concept during his presentation at the "Linking" conference. Service providers and educators from University Extension and Missouri Valley Human Resources in Marshall, Missouri, were provided a "Linking" grant to operationalize Kretzmann and McKnight at the community level by focusing on families and communities as the solution to, not the cause of, local problems. Twelve community leaders received advanced training in assets-based community capacity building and led discussions throughout the county. Groups identified individual and community strengths rather than deficits. Through this project, paradigms are changing: individuals are emerging as leaders, and interagency collaboration is stronger. An annual regional conference for human service providers will continue the theme of building their community from within by locating local assets, skills and capacities from individuals living in the community. A set of materials was designed for volunteer community leaders that is easily adapted and replicated for use in other areas. "Building from within" emphasizes three notions:

"every person in the community is gifted," "a gift isn't a gift until it is given away," and "it's all about building communities that care."

Help Getting Help: Bridging the Needs and Resources of Kingman Families, Lynne Durrant, Arizona. A teen opinion poll conduced in Kingman, Arizona, suggested many strengths were already present in local families. For example, 82 percent of the teens polled characterized their parents as good parents and most indicated strong parental monitoring of their friends and activities. However, more than half the teens reported worrying about their families having enough money, about drugs and drinking, and about how well or poorly their parents got along with one another. The proximity of Kingman to gaming facilities with entry level job opportunities attracts many people with few financial means or immediate support systems. A concerned group of individuals and organizations recently joined with Cooperative Extension to explore ways to find resources and programs to meet their needs. An immediate goal was a community center to help families-at-risk. A grant from the "Linking" conference helped support the core group, allowed the community coalition to expand membership and funded a grant writing seminar for a team to seek funds to complete the long-term project. A "Brown Bag" lunch strengthened the network's relationships and secured agency assistance. Cooperative Extension sponsored ROWEL's Life in the State of Poverty: Perceptions and Realities. The coalition is moving the proposed family resource center toward reality. A planning board is in place and has registered for tax-free status, evaluated and identified a site for the center and applied for United Way funds. "Linking" seed money enabled a group of interested citizens and agencies to act on their ideas to provide resources and programs to strengthen Kingman families.

"We started a coalition that identified gaps in services. Now the coalition is working on bridging these gaps.

Conference Participant

Training Community Leaders To Develop Family and Community Strengths, Beverly Butterfield, Virginia. Fauquier County was in the first group of counties assigned to initiate Welfare Reform in Virginia. While social services staff geared up for the changes in policy and programs, the community itself pondered questions about responsibility and roles, just who does what, and what role churches and non profits play versus the role of government. Beverly Butterfield of Virginia Cooperative Extension designed a project for local decision makers in hopes of creating a dialogue about what they needed to shape a safety net for families moving from home to work through Welfare Reform. She applied for and received a "Linking" grant to underwrite the cost of the Life in the State of Poverty simulation. Five social service agencies partnered to present the exercise. Fifty participants joined 15 volunteer leaders from the supporting agencies for the role playing exercise. A facilitated one-hour discussion followed. Within a week of the activity, people began discussing ways "to repair the community safety net." The County Administrator (who played a 4-year-old in the simulation) sent a memo to Extension saying he took seriously the dialogue of the training. He wanted the Extension staff to investigate creation of a volunteer coordinator position to track the resources available for families dropped from Welfare rolls. He even pledged money from the county budget. A plan is now in place and a person is assigned to work part-time to create this office. Word of the simulation spread and six other localities have requested it. An Extension state staff member is now working to prepare other regions in the state to offer the simulation activity. A final exciting development was a call from the Governor's office requesting information about what was happening in the county. A member of the U.S. House of Representatives subcommittee on Welfare Reform had asked about a visit to Virginia to Fauquier County to observe the positive changes taking place there. There was interest in having members of Congress experience the simulation. The Virginia Cooperative Extension continues to take the lead in educating limited resource families to move toward self-sufficiency and to move the community toward support of all families.

Information Outreach To Ease Transition of Self Sufficiency for Idaho's Welfare Recipients, Linda Kirk Fox, Idaho. Welfare reform is underway. Forty-four welfare reform proposals were put forth in 1996 to the Idaho state legislative body from the Governor's Task Force on Welfare Reform. Idaho participants at the "Linking" Families and Community Strengths conference heard Sarah Shuptrine describe two brochures that the Southern Institute on Children and Families had developed to help people transition off

welfare in North Carolina. The brochures, "Have You Heard about Benefits for Working Families" and "Leaving Welfare for Work Isn't as Scary as it Seems" were adaptable for use in other states. With a "Linking" grant and permission from the Southern Institute, collaborators from the University of Idaho Cooperative Extension System, Idaho Department of Health and Welfare, Project Office of Welfare Reform and advisory committees of the Idaho Family Nutrition Program adapted the two brochures using new Idaho regulations. Copies of these materials will help assure that Idaho recipients and public/private sector organization representatives working with recipients have a basic understanding of benefits for low income working families, especially the changes in benefits that occur when parents make the transition from welfare to work. Three thousand copies are being printed and distributed initially, but that number will increase. The Department of Health & Welfare will have master copies for reproduction through the state printing office. The "Linking" conference brought together people from states far apart geographically but with similar clientele needs. That "linking" effort made a valuable resource available to many families while avoiding costly duplication of efforts.

"The conference was a supportive factor in my work direction. For the first time our family, youth and community development extension specialists jointly created a 4-year plan-of-work for the state. All project areas integrate work across program areas."

Extension Specialist after attending conference

Linking Family and Community Strengths: Programs that Work, Annette Fitzgerald and Maria Pippidis, Connecticut and Delaware. Successful educational programs for families affected by welfare reform require multi-disciplinary educational programs designed with input from program participants and supporting agencies. The Cooperative Extension System is in a position in each state to respond and help in shaping welfare reform at a local, state and national level. The goal of this mini grant proposal was to identify model Cooperative Extension programs used in strengthening families and communities affected by welfare reform and to identify research efforts and needs. A survey of Extension Family Resource Management Specialists, Community Resource Development Specialists, Extension County Educators and Directors and Administrators was conducted in the fall of 1996. Responses to the survey indicate that while initiatives vary among states, the Cooperative Extension System is working successfully with community agencies, organizations and government at all levels to provide educational opportunities for low resource audiences to help them become self sufficient. Critical issues facing the Extension System in addressing welfare reform include declining Extension dollars, uncertainty of initiatives and the increase in numbers of working poor. By identifying model Extension programs, including EFNEP and FCL, efforts to address welfare initiatives can be maximized. A listing of the findings of the survey will be published and distributed nationally. Sharing the report of model programs will help those searching for "programs that work." Respondents felt they need further research to measure the full impact of Cooperative Extension programs, the effectiveness of collaborative efforts and the personal, social, community and economic impact of welfare reform initiatives on clientele.

Family TIES: Taking Responsibility, Investing Resources, Encouraging Empowerment, Supportive Communities, Alise Damschroder, Iowa. Family Ties is a collaborative effort in Union County, Iowa, to "build villages" through the collaboration of agencies offering family support. More than 15 agency representatives, adults and youth work to build a collaboration of support services for the area. With a "Linking" grant the collaboration developed and presented the workshop, "A Call to Action," providing an opportunity for local citizens to participate in the same learning experiences as service agency staff. The collaborating agencies worked with local partners to bring a resource person from the Search Institute to the workshop for a presentation focusing on the relationships needed to make youth successful. The main presentation addressed the 30 assets in youth that parents, community, schools and churches can build upon. While citizen participation was disappointing in number, the attendees representing education, social services, clergy and law enforcement evaluated the workshop highly. The collaborating agencies will continue the ongoing effort to nurture, sustain and build families and communities through closer communication and as advocates for all citizens.

Building on the Strengths of Native American Families and Communities, Carolyn Krueger, Wisconsin. The Native America population has been traditionally under-represented in Extension's program and curriculum development. Wisconsin Cooperative Extension established a task force of state and county Extension faculties to link the resources of Extension with Native American communities and people, and to build mutual understanding between Extension personnel and Native American clientele. Carolyn Krueger, family living program specialist, is a member of that task force. To help understand the issues of the Native American community in her state, she applied for and received a "Linking" grant to hold focus group interviews at three of the state's reservations. The primary objective of her project was to increase knowledge of the strengths and issues of Native American people and reservation communities in Wisconsin and to relate that knowledge to educational programming. Thirty individuals at three reservation sites openly discussed four core questions during November and December 1996. During discussions, the local participants revealed a great deal about the strengths and needs of the people in these communities. A thread that joined the three locations was the caring nature of the people and the value of extended family. It was also evident that educational materials do not need to be developed exclusively for the Native American audience, but they should be inclusive both in images and content. The information learned through the focus groups is being published in a report for distribution in the state and nationally if possible. The information will help Extension to meet the needs of all families, including Native Americans in Wisconsin.

"I have established a new working relationship with the head of community development programs, and we are planning joint projects.

Conference participant

Colorado Pathways from Poverty, CPFP Team, Colorado. The Colorado Pathways from Poverty team was formed in 1995, linked to the national research and action initiatives of the Rural Sociological Society, the W. K. Kellogg Foundation, the four regional rural development centers, and Cooperative Extension. Following participation in the western regional workshop of Pathways from Poverty, team members returned to their state as an informal network of individuals and organizations concerned with the well-being of low income citizens. In June 1996, several team members participated in the Linking Family and Community Strengths conference. Occasional meetings, conference calls and correspondences kept the group focused on holistic family and community approaches to address poverty. A "Linking" grant allowed the full team to work more aggressively together. The team worked to address the interdependent nature of family and community needs and well-being, capitalized on family and community assets and encouraged interorganizational and mixed discipline attention to family/community well-being, especially to those in or near poverty. The grant provided supplemental support for research and information exchange activities and for travel allocations for a major Colorado conference. The team continues to work informally and outcomes can be credited to a combination of factors, including mutually supportive team members, strong in-kind support of individual organizations, early Pathways from Poverty initiative organizing support and the subsequent "Linking" grant. With this support the Colorado Pathways from Poverty team members have built a stronger base for future interdisciplinary, intra- and interorganizational partnerships to address poverty concerns in the state.

Linking More Resources for Strengthening Families and Communities, Lou Stitzel, Colorado. Resources were needed to bring members of targeted audiences into coalitions of professional organizations formed to help families and communities in Colorado. With half the $1,000 "Linking" grant, The Resource Assistance Center (TRAC) supported four persons' travel to the Permanently Affordable Community Housing Conference. One focus of the meeting was building coalitions to find and develop community housing for limited income families. As an outgrowth of the meeting, a coalition including limited income clientele members, Grand Junction Housing Authority, branch offices of the Colorado Department of Energy and Local Affairs and the nonprofit New Dixie Development Company, applied for and received organizing funds to begin development of permanently affordable housing in their community in Mesa County, Colorado. Another group that includes clientele members (in Summit and White counties) is using ideas and materials from the conference to search for answers to community housing problems

exacerbated by the ski and tourist industry. Projects, programs and networks of professionals become stronger when members from the families affected are included. This grant strengthened several networks.

Making the Switch from a County Needs Assessment to a County Strengths Assessment, Colleen Benelli-Reed, Ohio. While Hancock County, Ohio, service organizations were aware of the concept of county strengths assessment, they needed more in-depth education before moving into an action phase. A "mind shift" was needed to ensure transition from the current needs assessment toward a strengths assessment. A multi agency workshop entitled "Asset-Based Community Development Workshop" was possible because of a "Linking" grant, local funding and registration fees. Of 34 workshop evaluations received, 32 respondents felt they achieved the objectives, including "moving the community beyond awareness into a plan of action." Since United Way conducts a community wide assessment every three to four years, that agency was targeted as the workshop partner to begin the transition toward strength assessment. The Ohio Cooperative Extension was also a community partner with the Hancock County Coordinating Council and the Family First Council in presenting the workshop. The shift of assessment implementers to the strengths based assessment has the potential for extensive impacts when service organizations understand and begin to use this method of assessment in community development. The eventual impact will be on the people in Hancock County who will no longer be viewed as "needy people" but as citizens with something valuable to contribute to the community.

Ohio Linking Family and Community Strengths Conference, Barbara Brahm, Ohio. The governor mandated the Ohio Family and Children First Initiative to work for healthy children, family stability, and to increase access to quality preschool and child care. Each county has a local council with members from family and youth serving agencies, community leaders and parents. Extension family and consumer sciences personnel are supportive of the Initiative at all levels. Because the goals of the Initiative mesh with the concepts of Linking Family and Community Strengths conference, Extension Agent Barbara Brahm proposed that a "Linking" grant would provide seed money for an Ohio Linking Family and Community Strengths Conference. The formal partnering of Extension with the governor's Initiative had an impact. While together developing the agenda for the conference, Extension and Initiative personnel built stronger relationships at all levels. The effort was slow and tedious to get started but collaborative work is underway. Networking between the two groups is expected to continue beyond the term of the governor and the Initiative. The conference is scheduled for November 1997 in Columbus, Ohio, with an anticipated attendance of more than 800. The conference is evidence of the major step taken toward collaborative programming better to serve families and children in Ohio.

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